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AUTHOR Gillespie, Patti P.
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ABSTRACT

A history of American women dramatists is provided in this paper with emphasis on the period 1960 to 1980. It is noted that by 1960 several American women had earned sizable reputations as dramatists; that prior to 1960, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, they had offered both commercial and experimental pieces; and that, like their male counterparts, they treated social issues when society at large seemed interested in such issues. Significant shifts in these patterns in the decades of 1960 and 1970 are discussed: (1) women playwrights now tended to cluster in alternative, noncommercial theatres off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway such as Ellen Stewart's Cafe La Mama; (2) black women playwrights emerged as a major new voice in the American theatre; and (3) after 1970, feminist playwrights began to surface and find production, beginning with Megan Terry of Open Theatre and Myrna Lamb's "Mod Donna." (MKM)

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AMERICAN WOMEN DRAMATISTS: 1960-1930

PATTI P. GILLESPIE

As Ellen Moers notes in her excellent volume, Literary Women, it is altogether remarkable that, as critics, we have examined -- and re-examined -- artists according to race, ethnic heritage, nationality, religion, politics, historical period, and even state of health, but that "by some accidental or willed critical narrowness, we have routinely denied ourselves additional critical access to the writers through the fact of their sex -- a fact surely as important as their social class or era or nationality, a fact of which women writers have been and still are conscious. How, as human beings, could they not be?"[1]

How, indeed, could they not be? And yet Moers is quite correct that women artists generally, and women playwrights in particular, have seldom been considered as a group. True, Brander Matthews in A Book About the Theatre (1916) briefly dealt with them and concluded that, as a group, they failed to attain greatness because they had "only a definitely limited knowledge of life" and tended "to be more or less deficient in the faculty of construction," presumably because they did not customarily "submit themselves to the severe discipline which has compelled men to be more or less logical."[2] Joseph Mersand in "When Ladies Write Plays" (1937) acknowledged that over a hundred women contributed successful plays to the American theatre during the late 1920s and early 1930s but concluded that they succeeded best as "reporters for the stage" rather than as philosophers or artists: "They rarely philosophize, their social consciousness is rarely apparent; they don't

preach sermons; they don't raise you to the heights of aesthetic emotions. This is true of even the best of the daughters of the Muses."[3] The New York Times, apparently baffled by the meagre offerings of American women dramatists to the contemporary theatre, asked in 1972, "Where are the Women Playwrights?" and learned that by then no one agreed on the question, much less the answer.[4]

Indeed, the number of women writing for the American stage has always been modest. Although the names of Mercy Otis Warren, Anna Cora Mowatt, and Julia Ward Howe are sprinkled through accounts of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American stage, not until the twentieth-century could American women playwrights be said to contribute on a regular basis to the literature of the theatre.

By 1960, however, several American women had earned sizeable reputations as dramatists. Pulitzer Prizes had been awarded to Miss Lula Bett (Zona Gale, 1921), Alison's House (Susan Glaspell, 1931), The Old Maid (Zoe Akins, 1935), and Harvey (Mary Cole Chase, 1945). The New York drama critics had honored Watch on the Rhine (Lillian Hellman,1941) and The Member of the Wedding (Carson McCullers, 1950). Abie's Irish Rose (Anne Nichols, 1922) had set Broadway records. Machinal (Sophie Treadwell, 1928) had been hailed as a supreme example of American expressionism. The Women (Clara Booth Luce, 1936) had infuriated the critic Heywood Broun. Rose Franken and Gertrude Stein had perplexed and annoyed critics and audiences; and Bella Spewack (in collaboration with Samuel) had delivered wacky farces in such profusion that a descriptive term, "Spewackian comedy," came into the language of show business. Significant contributions to the corpus of American drama had been made as well by Rachel Crothers, Edna Ferber, and Jean Kerr. The range, if not the number, of works by American women

was impressive. Prior to 1960, they had offered both commercial and experimental pieces, both propogandistic and escapist plays, and they had viewed their dramatic characters (female as well as male) through both cynical and sentimental eyes. Like the male playwrights of the same period, women dramatist were mostly white and middle-(or upper-middle) class; and, like their male counterparts, they treated social issues (including those pr ticular interest to women) when society at large seemed interested in such issues.[5]

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s, however, saw significant shifts in these patterns. Three new trends, in particular, became evident. First, women playwrights tended to cluster in alternative, non-commercial theatres. Second, black women playwrights emerged as a major new voice in the American theatre. And third, after 1970, feminist playwrights began to surface and find production.

The twenty year period opened promisingly enough. In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry won the Critics Circle Award for her A Raisin in the Sun. A year later, in 1960, Lillian Hellman won the same award for Toys in the Attic, But for the next twenty years no woman playwright was honored with either this, the Tony, or the Pulitzer Prize. Instead, women's dramatic activity shifted to the Off- and Off-Off-Broadway theatres, where their success was astonishing.

After Joe Cino pointed the way with his small cafe cum-theatre, a flurry of such spaces opened and offered homes to developing plays and playwrights. Free from the economic pressures strangling Broadway, young dramatists experimented in these non-traditional theatres with both controversial subjects and innovative dramatic structures. Since the 1960s was

the era of the Vietnam war, civil rights struggles, and decay of the inner cities, many of the plays dealt with these issues, often taking positions at odds with the law and therefore abhorent to many American citizens. For their controversial ideas, many authors sought release from familiar dramatic forms and styles as well: some tried to incorporate the audience into the theatrical event; some questioned the importance of dramatic illusion; some abandoned continuity of dramatic character; some manipulated scenery, costumes, and lights in new and intriguing ways while others eliminated them altogether; some strove to enrich the theatre by combining it with film, music, dance, poetry, and the visual arts, either singly or in several combinations. Because the plays departed from accepted ideas and familiar forms, they were not welcomed into the commercial theatre -- at least not for a time.

In these avant-garde theatres many women artists gained a prominence unknown to them before. Ellen Stewart, the founder and primary artistic force behind the Cafe La Mama, was the most influential of all Off-Off-Broadway producers, presenting 175 plays by 130 playwrights during the theatre's first six years.[6] Judith Malina, with Julian Beck, managed The Living Theatre, the most controversial and important of the many political theatres of the decade. Viola Spolin developed and published (Improvisation for the Theatre, 1963) the techniques and games that underlay the acting and producing styles of several emerging avant-garde groups. Julie Bovasso, Rosalyn Drexler, Maria Irene Fornes, Rochelle Owens, and Megan Terry all launched their playwriting careers in the artistic ferment offered by these alternative theatres.

These women writers formed no cohesive group. Drexler in Hot Buttered Roll (1963), Home Movies (1964), and Skywriting (1968) revealed herself as a comic artist of great exuberance, one whose world is faintly scatalogical

and often "camp." Fornes ranged freely in subjects and styles from The Successful Life of 3 (1966, a vaudeville produced by the Open Theatre) to Dr. Kheal (1968, the obvious forerunner of Roberto Athayde's Miss Margarida's Way) to Promenade (1969, a musical done in collaboration with Al Carmines). Owen's Futz (1967), Beclch (1968), or Homo (1969) bear scant resemblance to Bovasso's Gloria and Esperanza (1969) or The Moondreamers (1969). Indeed, perhaps the most intriguing trait of women dramatists of the 1960s is that their plays shared few features and that they were not aware of themselves as women; neither they nor their works gave any indication of a latent feminism.

Megan Terry, resident playwright with the Open Theatre, was an exception. In fact, it may be persuasively argued that this alternative theatre provided the most certain link between the avant garde of the 1960s and the developing feminism of the 1970s. Terry, best known for her anti-war play Viet Rock, wrote three other plays for the Open Theatre between 1963 and 1968 that presaged issues of the coming decade. The Gloaming, Oh My Darling, Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place, and Calm Down Mother specifically addressed problems of sexual identity, gender stereotyping, and systemic sexism in America.[7] Terry, however, was not the only member of the Open Theatre to confront in the sixties the feminism of the seventies. From the outset, women comprised at least half of the group's membership and figured prominently in all areas of production. Perhaps for that reason, much of the group's work stressed self-exploration, including the relationship between gender and social expectation, making the Open Theatre, according to its founder Joseph Chaikin, a "fertile place to bring up feminism." Significantly, more than half of the women active in this alternative theatre contributed importantly to the feminist theatres that exploded into prominence after 1970.[8]

"There is one ultimate revolution which encompasses them all, and that is the liberation of the female of the species so that the male of the species may be freed forever from supermasculine compulsion and may join his sister in full and glorious humanity. And fuck marriage."[9] With these words Myrna Lamb described, in 1970, the newest social convulsion.

When The Mod Donna was first produced by Joseph Papp at his Public Theatre, it was both condemned and praised; indeed, the play soon found itself at the center of a controversy over social, as well as well as dramatic, issues. Newsday's reviewer was sufficiently irritated by the play to wonder in print if "maybe we were wrong in allowing women to vote;" and a New Jersey reviewer predicted that the play would "spur a drive for male supremacy the like of which has never been seen before." But Clive Barnes of the New York Times seemed charmed by Lamb's "neat and funny way of eviscerating male supremacy," and the reviewer for Time magazine thought the play "a bracing tonic" and Lamb "a deft lyricist with barbed wit and a no-nonsense lucidity about contemporary man-woman relationships."[10]

In truth, the play is an odd assortment of ideas and actions that do not coalesce to produce a great, or even a good, work of art. Still, its importance is indisputable. The Mod Donna adopted many of the techniques developed and nurtured by the avant garde of the 1960s and turned them to a new subject -- feminism. It is now considered the first important feminist play and, as such, the harbinger of the vigorous feminist theatre movement of the 1970s.

The issues raised by Lamb in The Mod Donna found expression in her other works (Scyklon Z, Apple Pie, Crab Quadrille) as well as in the plays of women like Martha Boesing, Gretchen Cryer, Corinne Jacker, Tina Howe,

Karen Malpede, and Eve Merriam. With feminist theatres erupting nationwide during the 1970s (more than fifty by the end of the decade), new plays by, for, and about women suddenly had outlets in unprecedented numbers. Some of the oldest and best-known of the feminist theatres, like Women's Interart in New York, were showcases for the works of talented women. They offered, on a regular basis, plays by women artists, particularly such plays as presented women in non-stereotyped ways and offered strong roles for actresses. Works produced in such theatres tended to be taken seriously, to be reviewed by the established media, and to find their way into (usually women's) anthologies. Far more numerous and less known, however, were theatres like Rhode Island Feminist and the short-lived Its All Right to be Woman, which favored improvised pieces, collectively developed scripts, and authored works too radical in content or structure to find acceptance by general audiences, even the liberal patrons Off-Broadway. Usually ignored and occasionally ridiculed by established reviewers, such groups nevertheless nurtured scores of women writers, serving as a source of ideas and inspiration and, finally for some, as a springboard to better-established theatres or to publication and eventual acceptance by reviewers.[11] Any survey of American women dramatists must acknowledge the importance of these feminist theatres during the 1970s in soliciting and welcoming new plays by women, just as any such survey must acknowledge those alternative theatres that launched the careers of women for whom feminism was not an issue.

Just as the artistic ferment Off- and Off-Off-Broadway gave rise to a theatrical avant garde of the 1960s and forged links with the developing feminist playwrights and theatres of the 1970s, so too was it crucial in the rise of black women playwrights. When Alice Childress's Gold Through the Trees opened Off-Broadway in 1952, it was the first play by a black woman to gain a professional New York production. From then until 1980, with

Hansberry the notable exception, black women playwrights (as white) remained outside the commercial mainstream; but unlike their white counterparts, black women dramatists did constitute a recognizable group from the outset: their subject was black people and the problems they encountered because of their race.

When Funnyhouse of a Negro by Kennedy opened Off-Broadway in 1964, it was only the third play by a black woman to be professionally produced in New York. Unlike Childress and Hansberry, Kennedy did not write realistic plays organized through action. Her three most famous works, Funnyhouse, The Owl Answers (1965), and The Rat's Mass (1969) all featured a young black woman torn by conflicting claims: black and white, good and evil, love and hate. In each, Kennedy presented poetic and allusive excursions into worlds of dream and nightmare, worlds occupied by people and animals who change identities, places, and points of view with dizzying speed and without accompanying explanation. The cast list of The Owl Answers, for example, calls for a character named "She who is Clara Passmore who is the Virgin Mary who is the Bastard who is the Owl" and another named "The White Bird who is Reverend Passmore's Canary who is God's Dove." Kennedy's poetic flights often result in dialogue that is incancatory and obscure, likened by one critic to "a storm of ambiguities that blow and swirl into a pool of liquid sunlight and shadow."[12] Indeed, Kennedy's plays suggest rather than show and therefore demand audiences willing to reach understanding through unfolding images rather than through developing narratives.

Within the range defined by Hansberry and Kennedy rest the plays of other black women authors. Most resemble Hansberry more than Kennedy in preferring a realistic style for their sympathetic portrayals of the peculiar

frustration of black people. Elaine Jackson's Toe Jam (1971), for example, treats the passage of a young girl from aloofness to involvement, while Marti Charles' Job Security (1970) presents a chilling tale of a ghetto student who murders teachers in retribution for their callous ineptitude. Micki Grant's commercially successful musical, Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope (1972), diverges from realism and causality in many details, but not until the work of Ntozake Shange did the experimental techniques of the alternative theatres, the power of the Black Arts movement, and the vitality of contemporary feminism converge. The result was stunning.

Without elaborate scenery, without a narrative line, without a well-known star, without indeed any of the usual trappings of a commercial success, for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf moved onto Broadway and captured audiences and critics alike. Clive Barnes of the New York Times called the piece "extraordinary and wonderful. . . a lyric and tragic exploration into black women's awareness.[13]

In colored girls, subjects previously believed too controversial and theatrical techniques thought too incoherent to be commercially successful find expression in a form acceptable to Broadway's theatregoers. Its images and language proclaim the author's race and sex. Its lyric form and flowing style of production capture the qualities prized by the avant garde, who have long strived to free theatre and drama from the shackles of domestic realism.

The friendly reception of colored girls, too, seemed to open more theatres to plays by women that dealt with dramatic subjects and used theatrical techniques previously thought unpromising: Gretchen Cryer's I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road, Eve Merriam's The Club, Marsha Norman's Getting Out, and Elizabeth Swados's Runaways, to cite only the most obvious.

After an examination of women dramatist as a group, some conclusions are possible. Certainly, Mersand's earlier generalizations prove absolutely false: contemporary American women dramatists were not primarily reporters for the stage; they did philosophize; they did preach; and their social consciousness was readily apparent. Matthews likewise sounds merely quaint as he patronized women dramatists for the flawed construction of their plays and the deficient experiences of their lives. In obvious contradiction to his observations, some contemporary women excelled in realistic plays unified through action even as others forged new forms that won commercial acceptance. And social consciousness, often combined with political awareness, was a distinguishing feature of most of their works.

Three trends are apparent. First, after 1960, most American women dramatists produced their plays Off-rather than On-Broadway, and most abandoned the dramatic structures typically associated with American realism in favor of those modelled on the epic, the argument, or the lyric poem. Second, after 1960, black women dramatists exerted leadership and achieved successes unprecedented in the history of the American theatre; and they offered the major exception to the first generalization, since, although working Off-Off-Broadway, they continued to write plays unified by action and rooted in social and domestic problems. Third, after 1970, increasing numbers of women turned to the fact of their womanness for a new perspective, indeed for a new subject. Thereafter, American women dramatists would be routinely described with respect to their identification with feminism as well as their preferences for certain dramatic and theatrical techniques.

Such a survey of female dramatists, however, appears to raise at least as many questions as it answers.

Why, for example, after establishing a strong foothold in the commercial American theatre of the 1920s and 1930s, did women dramatists retreat from this forum? Several different explanations have been advanced, but none has been proved. Some argue that social forces during the 1940s and 1950s reversed the movement toward emancipation and replaced it with a period of adjustment to women's "proper sphere." Rachel Frank, for example, proposed that women abandoned careers and returned home in large numbers because of the pseudo-scientific support given "The Cult of True Womanhood" by the publication of Helene Deutsch's book (The Psychology of Women, 1944), the widespread dissemination of these views by the popular press, and the general intellectual repression that set in after World War II.[14] To her list of social factors could well be added the state of a post-war economy that again drove women from the work force in order to make way for returning vetrans. Some propose instead that the retreat was due to changes in the structure of the American theatre itself, a triumph of the forces that led to the hit-or-flop syndrome on Broadway and the consequent development of alternative theatres Off-Broadway. Lillian Hellman, Jean Kerr, and Clare Booth Luce all described economic pressures that made the effort of producing plays on Broadway not worth the toll it took on their personal lives. Rosalyn Drexler angrily indicted Broadway's commercialism, and Rochelle Owens implied that women, in particular, needed freedom from its "horrible economic entanglements."[15] Still others complained that women dramatists were the victims of a barely disguised misogyny among established literary and theatrical critics and that males excluded women from the camaraderie so essential to the production of plays on Broadway.[17]

Why, among women dramatists of the 1960s and 1970s, did blacks exert so profound an influence? The early success of Lorraine Hansberry may have

created a climate particularly receptive to the efforts of other black women. Again, the anger and power of the then-recent Black Arts movement may have been strong enough to open theatre doors to all blacks and to sweep its women (along with its men) into prominence. Or perhaps in their race, black women dramatists found a serious subject for their plays, a subject that they knew intimately and one that society had already legitimized.

But most significant and puzzling of all, why were women dramatists so late in discovering their womanness as a suitable subject for serious plays? Why did not "the fact of their sex" (to use Moer's phrase) give them a subject until 1970 or later? Again, different theories have been advanced. Marcia Lieberman observed that until recently all accepted literary conventions were based on a view of life and society that was masculine.[18] Susan Koppelman Cornillon urged that society had conditioned women to view their own experiences as a typical, abnormal, or trivial, but, in any case, not as suitable subjects for serious art.[19] Joanna Russ argued convincingly that an active heroine is a contradiction in terms ("What Can A Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write") -- and thus implied that women were left with the option of writing about men or of not writing for the stage.[20]

The question remain. They must persist, unanswered, until a new perspective resolves them. Their existence, however, is proof of the vigor and importance of the American woman as dramatist.

Endnotes

[1]Ellen Moers, Literary Women: The Great Writers (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), p.xiv.

[2]Brander Matthews, A Book About the Theatre (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), pp. 124-125.

[3]Joseph Mersand, 'When Ladies Write Plays," Players Magazine, 14, 1 (September/October 1937): 8.

[4]"Where Are the Women Playwrights?" New York Times, 20 May 1972, sec. 2, pp. D1, D3.

[5]See, for example, Yvonne B. Shafer, "The Liberated Woman in American Plays of the Past," Players Magazine, 49, 3-4 (Spring 1974): 95-100.

[6]According to Oscar G. Brockett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 711.

[7]See Phyllis Jane Wagner, "On Megan Terry" in Approaching Simone: A Play by Megan Terry (Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1973), pp. 30-35.

[8]For this information I am indebted to Betty Moseley Davis, "Women at the Open Theatre," paper presented at the annual convention of the Southern Speech Communication Association, Knoxville, TN, April 1977. Davis cites as her source, Joseph Chaikin, telephone interview, 19 July 1976.

[9]Myrna Lamb, "Introduction," Plays of Women's Liberation: The Mod Donna and Scyklon Z (New York: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1971), p. 28.

[10]Ibid., back cover.

[11]Patti P. Gillespie, "Feminist Theatre: A Rhetorical Phenonenon," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 64 (1978): 284-94.

[12]Ted Shine, "Introduction to The Owl Answers," in Black Theatre, U.S.A., ed., James V. Hatch (New York: The Free Press, 1974), p. 756.

[13]As cited on dustcover, Ntozake Shange, for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1977).

[14]Rachel Frank, "Introduction," A Century of Plays by American Women, ed. Rachel Frank (New York: Richards Rosen Press, Inc., 1979), p. 21.

[15]As quoted in "Where are the Women Playwrights?" See footnote 4.

[16]See, for example, Fraya Katz-Stoker, "The Other Criticism: Feminism and Formalism," Images of Women in Fiction, ed. Susan Koppelman Comillon

(Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), pp. 315-327, but especially pp. 324-326; Marilyn Stasio, "Night the Critics Lost Their Cool," Ms., 4 October 1975, pp. 101-104.

[17]Honor Moore, "Introduction," The New Women's Theatre: Ten Plays by Contemporary American Women, ed. Honor Moore (New York; Vantage Books, 1977), p. xiv.

[18]Marcia R. Lieberman, "Sexism and the Double Standard in Literature," Images of Women, pp. 328-340.

[19]Susan Koppelman Cornillon, "The Fiction of Fiction," Images of Women, pp. 113-130.

[20]Joanna Russ, "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," Images of Women, pp. 3-20.